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ABSTRACT

The concept of narrative was used to examine the process of transformative learning and explore the possibilities for using narrative as a central construct for theorizing transformation and thereby expanding the possibilities for research and practice. The concepts of narrative used in the analysis were as follows: (1) it moves from past to future; (2) it spans the psychological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions in content and form; and (3) it includes cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions. These concepts were used to analyze the narrative of a woman who was incarcerated for serious drug offenses and was herself an addict. The analysis demonstrates that the method of using retrospective life history that is typically used as the primary form of data when studying transformative learning provides only one perspective on transformative learning and that prospective studies might provide researchers and theoreticians with a new perspective on information on transformative learning. The argument is made that since the incidents that serve as a catalyst for transformation are rarely predicable enough to enable study, other ways of expanding understanding of transformation must be found. Reconceptualizing transformative learning as a narrative process is deemed promising because it addresses some of the problems that accrue when transformation is thought of in constructivist terms. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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NARRATIVE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract: The concept of narrative is useful for theorizing transformative learning. Three characteristics are that it (a) moves from past to future, (b) spans the psychological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions in content and form, and (c) includes cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions. Narrative analysis of data suggests insights unavailable with other analytic approaches.

In recent years the concept of narrative has developed and come to play a major role in a wide range of fields including psychology, literature, speech communication, anthropology, and sociology. The reasons for this ascendancy are rooted in the pervasiveness of narrative in our lives; as Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) point out, as human beings we live storied lives. We make meaning of our lives in terms of narrative. When asked to identify ourselves, although we may begin with single word answers such as mother, student, or teacher, we usually go on to elaborate with a story that brings feeling, context, and value to our lives. Another way to say this is that we learn by constructing and reconstructing narratives to make meaning of information and events. Most of us know that if we really want to learn something new, we should teach it to another person. The task of constructing what we are trying to learn into a meaningful narrative, whether represented in words or by other means, pushes us to integrate and reformulate new information, ideas, and ultimately, our own identity. That is a highly visible example of narrative learning. Thus, we make meaning for ourselves through a process of developing narratives.

In this paper, we will apply these ideas to the process of transformative learning and explore the possibilities for using narrative as a central construct for theorizing transformation. The purpose of this exploration is to discover the ways in which conceptualizing transformative learning as a narrative process expands the possibilities for research and practice. In the remainder of this paper, we will explore three of the advantages of using narrative to understand transformative learning and then draw on research data to illustrate what insights are possible using a narrative process of data analysis.

Three Advantages of Narrative

Brooks (2000) points out the limitations of using constructivist concepts as a framework for conceptualizing transformative learning theory. Brooks & Edwards (1997) name several comparative advantages for using narrative as a concept for understanding transformative learning. This paper will focus on three of those advantages:

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1. Narrative moves from the past to the future
2. Narrative spans the psychological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions both in content and form
3. Narrative includes cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions.

Narrative Moves from the Past To The Future

One value of narrative is that it gives us a way to connect past, present, and future, both as individuals and as societies. When we reflect on our personal life histories, we make sense of our past in a way that justifies and explains how we are in the present, and that moves us into a credible future. Freeman (1993) makes this point when he argues that autobiography, or any form of life review, is essentially written backwards, starting with the end of the story that we already know (namely, the present) and interpreting the past in ways that enable us to make sense of that present reality. This is how we structure a life story that is coherent and that justifies who and what we currently are. It also enables us to envision a future that is credible, the further development of the story of who we are. This coherence, Linde (1993) and others argue, is an essential property of narrative and is something that we constantly work to achieve. Coherence is always a work in progress, always under construction, enabling us to manage constant change and the often real contradictions with which we must live.

A function of this temporal character of narrative is its ability to make process visible. Narratives are dynamic. They are like videos, capturing movement, growth, change, and ever the unfolding plots of our lives (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). Examining the structure and content of related narratives allows us to see and understand a particular process. Through multiple means we can interpret the inner workings of the narrative, examining it from many perspectives (see, for example, Riessman, 1991; Mishler, 1986; Lieblich & Josselson, 1997). For example, we can focus on how is the story told, what are the central plot elements, how are they joined together, what devices are used to create coherence? We can do the same at the level of language: what metaphors are used, is the story in active or passive voice, what types of words are used to characterize the protagonists in the story? We can also probe the content of the narrative: what are the overarching themes, what events are chosen to convey these themes, how do these themes relate to one another? All of these approaches offer us ways to interpret what the informant is experiencing and what meaning they are giving to that experience.

Narrative Spans the Psychological, Social, Cultural, and Historical Dimensions

We generate narrative either in conversation with ourselves, in rehearsed conversations with an imagined other, or in conversation with an other or others. In this sense, we move easily and unconsciously between our individual experiences and the social milieu, which constitute our world. What we generate internally and share with others becomes a part of the others' understanding of us and in some way probably alters how they understand their world. Similarly, what others express to us becomes a part of the material we have available for making sense of our world. Understanding our process of meaning-making and life and world narration in this way challenges the traditionally monadic or individualistic understanding of the self within society that currently dominates U.S. mainstream culture. We also incorporate our past and the past of our family, ancestors, community, nation, and world into our personal narrative. And

however small we may see ourselves, our own past, often narrated by others, becomes a part of their own narration.

Thus, Annie's own self-narrative is infused with the brooding darkness of her Scandinavian grandparents and the endless construction and reconstruction of self-identity characteristic of mainstream America. These stand in stark contrast to the way in which a recently immigrated Chinese American might write her own narrative in terms of her Asian relatives and a self that is constituted by a social group (Sparrow, 2000; Rolands 19). Annie's personal story, for example, carries the pieces of stories she heard from her parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles around the Sunday dinner table. That a story should be humorous, she learned from her father's Irish southern family. That it should be heroic and have a moral, she learned from her father. Her mother's family was quieter and the stories they told were stories of the immediate and the small things and people in life. Were she to tell a story of personal transformation, it would be situated between the psychological tension of heroism and the conscious appreciation of the small, the social and political tension of expansion and conservation. My life experiences took her to many cultures to live and work, and her place in history raises the importance of ethnicity. Thus, her own story of transformation circles around and weaves itself in an out among the recurrent themes of culture and ethnicity.

Narrative Includes Cognitive, Affective, Spiritual, and Somatic Dimensions

Narrative includes the cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions of personhood. A story that is acceptable in mainstream U.S. culture requires that we link what we tell to a "point" in some way. This is one cognitive dimension of narrative. As Bruner (1990, 1996) points out, our stories are self-justifying. We write and rewrite our pasts to justify the present and the future. We make chaotic lives sound rational, an extension of the value of control in U.S. mainstream culture. These manipulations of our life stories and language require cognitive skill, and if we are successful, our audience will feel satisfied.

Our narratives frequently appeal to affect. They can be so compelling that they move us to change our opinions and understandings or they drive us to action. Personal narratives of hardship and transformation can inspire empathy and admiration in listeners. If one were to narrate an experience of political persecution to other refugees from one's own country, the story would probably be crafted to elicit an entirely different emotion than if we it were told to the immigration board. Narratives can touch us somatically and spiritually like the stories of incarceration and execution that Carolyn tells from her research with women prison inmates. When she talks about her experiences of working with women inmates or their reactions to executions, we both feel physically ill and are left with a feeling of fragility, both in our own lives and the lives of people we know and love.

All three of these dimensions of narrative offer enormous potential for understanding and theorizing transformative learning. Narrative offers us a window through which we can view the self, a self that is multiple and complex, a self that is dynamic and changing. In the next section we will illustrate the possibilities of this approach with excerpts from an interview that Carolyn did.

Using Narrative Analysis: An Example

Reba was a woman who was incarcerated for serious drug offenses and was herself a drug addict. In her interview, we hear several overarching narratives that are in dialogue with one another. What dominates though is her addiction narrative; she likens her life to a roller coaster, an especially apt metaphor since her drugs of choice were amphetamines, and she lived for the exciting high that these drugs provide. The underlying structure of her life history follows the roller coaster image: always living on the edge, and dealing with the inevitable disasters that resulted. She also has a recovery narrative, but it was fragmented and incomplete. In one dimension of this narrative, she reproduces the cultural rhetoric of recovery, what could be called her "just say no" talk. She mouths stock phrases; however, she acts in ways that deny them. She resists drug treatment and refuses to attend AA meetings in prison, even though doing either would improve her standing before the parole board and increase the likelihood of her early release.

The second dimension of this recovery narrative is more personal and more revealing, and this is the subject of the following excerpt. This dimension of recovery catches how she conceptualizes life off the roller coaster, imagining what it might be like to live on an even keel. Carolyn asks her if her life has ever been like this and she replies that being in prison provides that, but of course it is an enforced evenness, and she chafes at being out of control. Apart from that, she can't remember another time off the roller coaster. Then, in mid-sentence, she recalls a time when it had been true:

> R: Ah....ah...The memory of being at my aunt's house, ah...being a kid....playing with my cousins. Ah....Going through her clothes, trying on her different colored fishnet hose, getting ready for church (laugh). Umhum...Getting into the makeup umhum, yeah...(pause) Ah, and you know, I can see my aunt's house just as clear as a bell, and I must have not even been a teenager yet, you know. I don't know how old I was, maybe I was 9. I don't know.
>
> C: And that was a happy memory.
>
> R: Mmhmm, yes...

Reba has significant memory loss from her long-term drug use, so the fact that she can remember this incident from childhood at all is remarkable. More significant for our purposes is the story she tells on the heels of this one, without any prompting from Carolyn. This story is about a recent visit from her husband and their 12-year-old son, Will.

> R: You know, I find myself worrying about my son sometimes, but I know that I shouldn't, because there's nothing, nothing I can do, not one thing....My husband and my son came to see me last weekend....When Will went to get us a coke, I told Joe, I said, 'You know, I have been real worried about that gun of yours. Ah, I didn't want to bring it up in front of Will to give him any ideas, but ah, do you keep it put up and unloaded, and...' you know. I said, 'because he gets home from school and you don't get home til later, is all that under control?' You know, things like that, I find myself in here thinking about....Of course, his

reply was, ah 'No, me and Will both sleep with a gun under our pillow,' or something off-the-wall that just - but you know, he was telling me that so that I would be reassured that it was taken care of, you know, he made a joke out of it. But it was serious to me.

Note the juxtaposition of these stories. When pressed about what it is like to be off the roller coaster and on an even keel, she is ambivalent ("It feels good but it hurts") and tries to claim that it has never been her experience before. Then the childhood memory swims into consciousness, striking in its innocence, children playing at being adults....safe....happy. But what is particularly significant is the connection she makes between being on an even keel and not having control over anything. For someone who has successfully lived a double life for some time (she went to great lengths to hide her drug use over the years), not having control is fatal. What is intriguing is the story that follows on the heels of this admission, the story about her fears for her son. She frames this as control (the gun being "put up and unloaded") and her inability to exercise any control on her son's behalf ("There's nothing, nothing I can do, not one thing..."), but at a deeper level she is talking about herself. Not having control is equivalent to not being on the roller coaster, which for her means not being on drugs. The very thought is menacing, even life-threatening, and she cannot really entertain it. This accounts for the truncated character of this recovery narrative: not only does it not work for her, but it is something she feels she must avoid in order to stay alive.

Reba's story is about a transformation that did not happen but it is nonetheless valuable to us in seeing how narrative can give us a useful way to understand the transformational process. What dominates her life is the addiction narrative, and while she does have an alternative narrative of recovery, it is conflicted and lacks coherence, so her addiction narrative remains unchallenged. If she is to change, she must develop an alternative narrative that truly works, one that offers her life rather than death, one that can sustain her and enable her to engage the world in a new way. She has a lot of work to do to get there.

Conclusion

The study of transformative learning is typically carried out using retrospective life history narratives as the primary form of data. Taylor (2000) points out that prospective studies might provide researchers and theoreticians with a new perspective and information on transformative learning. However, since the incidents that serve as a catalyst for transformation are rarely predictable enough to enable study, we need to find other ways of expanding our understanding. One way is to reconceptualize transformative learning in new ways and thereby enable new approaches to research design, data collection, data analysis, and representation to take place. Conceptualizing transformative learning as a narrative process seems to offer promise as a means of increasing our breadth and depth of our understanding. It addresses some of the problems that accrue when transformation is thought of in constructivist terms.

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